# pocket rockets

## POINT-AND-SHOOT CAMERAS

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS **PETER RYAN**

In the September/October 2015 issue of *African Birdlife* we reviewed entry-level lenses for bird photography using SLR cameras, but not everyone wants to spend tens of thousands of rands or lug around several kilograms of cameras and lenses. If you simply want to record the birds you see, the latest generation of compact, high-magnification 'point-and-shoot' cameras offers a versatile alternative. To assess their suitability for birders, I tested four cameras. Truth to tell I wasn't expecting too much, but by the end of the weekend trial I was seriously considering buying one – the only question was which one.

At the cheaper end of the range, the Canon Powershot SX60 HS (R4 595*) and the Nikon Coolpix P610 (R6 295*) are similar. With a 65x optical zoom, the Canon appears to have more reach than the 60x Nikon, but don't confuse the headline claim with magnification; it refers to the difference between the full wide and full zoom range. In fact, the Nikon offers slightly greater magnification. Its 4.3–258-mm focal length is equivalent to a 24–1440-mm lens in SLR terms, going from wide-angle to almost 29x magnification. By comparison, the Canon has a 3.8–247-mm lens, giving an effective 21–1365-mm lens (27x maximum magnification). Its greater zoom range results from its wider wide-angle lens.

Even more impressive is the Nikon Coolpix P900 (R10 495*), which offers an incredible 83x zoom thanks to its 3.8–357-mm lens (equivalent to a 24–2000-mm SLR). This means you can go from wide-angle to 40 times magnification literally at the touch of a button. And with a macro capability too, you'll never have to agonise over the selection of lenses to take on an outing or frantically change lenses while the photographic opportunity of a lifetime slips away. However, it only focuses to about five metres at maximum zoom.

How do these compact cameras perform in terms of image quality at magnifications comparable to those of a spotting scope? The answer is surprisingly well, at least for static objects. All have efficient image stabilisation so you can take hand-held images at these extreme magnifications. Indeed, hand shake is often so severe that you risk losing the head or feet of your subject if you frame it too tightly – but at least some images are impressively sharp. Of course, if you want to video your subjects you will need a very good tripod and probably still require further image stabilisation during the rendering process.

But what about focus? One advantage of the small sensors in point-and-shoot cameras is that they offer greater depth of field than the larger sensors in SLR cameras, which is a real boon for macro photography. However, you still need the camera to focus on the right subject. They offer several autofocus modes, but I stuck to the default option, which uses a semi-intelligent algorithm to identify the subject and stay with it. This works surprisingly often (at least for relatively static subjects), but can be frustrating when it selects something other than the bird you want to photograph. And like any autofocus system, it fails to cope when your subject is peering through a screen of vegetation – here the lack of manual focus is a real drawback.

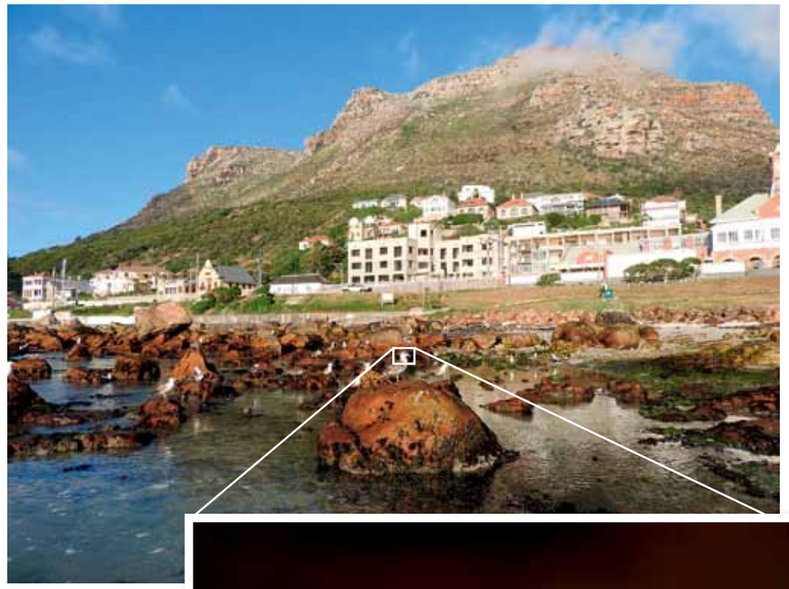
*The great depth of field in point-and-shoot cameras is evident even at high magnification. Most of the Cape Teals in this flock are more or less sharp, whereas the same image taken with an SLR would have had only a few birds in focus. Image taken with the Canon SX60 at about 20x magnification.*

Point-and-shoot cameras have two main limitations relative to SLR systems. First is their electronic viewfinders. These are better than relying on the rear display screen to frame images and check focus, but can't compete with the optical viewfinders of SLR cameras. And they are made even harder to use at extreme magnification – finding your subject when zoomed in is not easy. Second is the problem of the lag between pressing the button and actually triggering the shutter. The four test models have lags of less than 0.05 seconds, but this is still perceptible. To make matters worse, the viewfinder freezes while taking the image, so you struggle to stay with the action. Perhaps this can be turned off or at least offset by selecting the continuous shooting mode >



*Point-and-shoot cameras often outperform SLRs in macro photography, thanks to their greater depth of field. The Nikon P900 (left) takes passable macro shots, but lacks the close-up power of the Canon G3 X (right).*

above *Fine close-up details of a Forest Canary, captured with the Canon G3 X.*



*The Nikon Coolpix P900 has an incredible zoom range. The wide-angle view of Muizenberg beach (above) zooms in to capture an impressively sharp and detailed image of the closest Kelp Gull's head (right).*

(seven frames per second for the Nikons and six for the Canons), but the current generation of point-and-shoots still can't compete with SLRs when it comes to action shots.

Before recommending which model to buy, I must point out that this was not a comprehensive trial. I was unable to test Fujifilm's Finepix S1 (50x zoom, R5 495*), which has an effective 24–1200-mm lens and takes an impressive 10 frames per second. I did try the Samsung WB1100F (35x zoom, R2 495*) with an effective 25–875-mm lens, but its lack of a viewfinder, the fixed rear display and long lens lag made it hard to use, and it struggled to focus on moving birds even more than the other models tested.

If you're budget conscious, there's little to choose between the Canon SX60 and the Nikon P610. The Nikon is 100 grams lighter, has slightly greater reach and a faster maximum shutter speed (1/4000 of a second), and offers a built-in panoramic stitching programme (although image size is small). By comparison, the Canon has a better wide-angle capability, can take an external flash and can shoot in RAW, and is almost R2 000 cheaper. But both are overshadowed by the Nikon P900 which, although heavier and more costly than its rivals in this review, is still much lighter (900 grams) and cheaper than an SLR with even an entry-level telephoto lens.

So that's the one to buy, right? Yes, if it's your primary birding camera or if you want a lightweight camera to take on overseas trips. Its huge advantage is that you can take acceptable images from further away than you can with an SLR, making it great for recording rarities or snapping images of birds you can't identify. Just be aware that all these models are made largely of plastic, so are not as tough as top-end SLRs, and they lack weather sealing.

If you're looking for a more rugged point-and-shoot to augment your SLR set-up, consider Canon's weather-proof Powershot G3 X (R10 295*). Its 8.8–220-mm (effective 24–600-mm) lens delivers a more modest 25x zoom, but it boasts a large, 1-inch sensor with better image resolution (20 vs 16 megapixels) than the other models, improving image quality especially at higher ISO settings. It also has greater ease of image control thanks to an exposure compensation dial, better macro capability, and has a touch-sensitive screen for the smartphone generation. Its main drawback – especially for bird photography – is the lack of a built-in digital viewfinder (available as an optional extra). It can't compete with the Nikon P900 for bird photography, but I want one to take hiking. ◆

above *Although the Canon G3 X lacks the high magnification power of the other models tested, it took the best close-up shots of a confiding Orange-breasted Sunbird.*

left *One of the major drawbacks of point-and-shoot cameras is that they struggle to capture birds in flight. This Greater Flamingo, shot with the Nikon P610, was the only vaguely acceptable image obtained over the weekend trial.*

**Recommended retail price at time of going to press*

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